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ABSTRACT

In summer 1984, a study was conducted to assess the current status of the student body at a two-year college in light of the assertion that two-year colleges are becoming increasingly inaccessible to poor, disadvantaged, and minority students. A sample of 56 students was randomly selected from a population of 310 students attending a small, private urban two-year college. Study findings included the following: (1) 61% of the students were white, 86% were female, 68% were between the ages of 17 and 25, and 77% graduated from high school with a diploma; (2) 59% were single with at least one dependent child; (3) 27% were heads of households; (4) family socioeconomic levels did not differ significantly between white and minority students; (5) 48% of the students' parents had a high school education, and 29% had some college experience; (6) 66% of the sample reported an income under $5,000; (7) 76% of minority respondents and 24% of white respondents were unemployed; (8) most received some type of financial aid; and (9) self-motivation was a primary factor in the students' decisions to obtain an education. Based on study findings, it was concluded that the two-year college was still accessible to needy students. (LAL)

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ARE MIDDLE-CLASS WHITES BEGINNING TO OCCUPY TWO-YEAR COLLEGES?

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ABSTRACT

Two-year community colleges have undergone many changes within the last twenty years. Enrollments for two-year colleges have more than doubled since 1960. Some critics of two-year colleges have asserted that these colleges are no longer being occupied by minorities and low-income students. That is, two-year colleges are beginning to attract more white, middle-class students.

This study examined a random sample of 56 studennts enrolled at a predominant white (76%), female (60%) college. Comparative findings were found between white and minority students. Socioeconomical levels did not differ significantly between groups, $X^2(3)=4.70$, $p_{,}>.10$. Minority respondents were compartively more unemployed (26%) than whites (8%). The primary job sources for the employment for the whites were school and self.

The findings from this investigated study only concluded that the majority of the students at the college were white female students. As a group, the students would not be considered middle-class due to the low levels of income and education. Data results suggest students are working-class students who have decided to pursue an education. The two-year colleges apparently has not limited the access to needy students who want to pursue an education. This study did not affirm recent findings; yet, it enhances the need for two-year colleges to maintain their original purposes and goals as community colleges for training skills needed for the job market.

1. INTRODUCTION

Two-year community colleges have undergone vast changes within the last twenty years. One of the changes has been seen with increasing enrollment figures. Enrollments for two-year colleges have more than doubled since 1960, because more nontraditional students, such as older adults, women, and minorities, are now enrolled. Another change has been seen with curriculum programs that offer diverse continuing, career, and training skills needed for the immediate job market. Overall, community colleges have become a vehicle for housewives, working adults, minorities, and others who are seeking educational training skills within a short period of time.

However, despite the growth and progress of these colleges, their legitimate existence still seems to be questionable. The perceptions of two-year colleges are frequently negative, compared to four-year institutions. For example, two-year institutions have been viewed as overgrown, second-class places of learning (Nielsen & Polishook, 1982). Nevertheless, these institutions have continued to exist by maintaining their functional purposes and services. They survived the censured views of the 1970's with enrollment growth.

Retrospectively, during the '70s most postsecondary institutions were beginning to experience adverse effects of educational, social, and economical problems. Some of the unfolding problems included enrollment declines, low achievement scores, quality education, increased unemploymnet rates, and inflated costs. It was during this decade that the job market appeared bleak for most college graduates. Consequently, the value of college education was questioned (Freeman & Hollaman, 1975; Ellis, 1980). Yet, the growth and survival rates at two-year schools were comparatively higher than at four-

year schools. Thus, facilities and programs were expanded to accommodate an influx of diverse students who were enrolling at a two-year college (Feldman, 1982).

By Fall, 1983, part-time enrollments at two-year colleges accounted for the largest contribution to the college enrollment increases. Reported figures showed a 4.6 percent part-time increase at public community colleges, and a 9.8 percent increase at private two-year colleges (Chronicle, 1983). This increased rate of enrollments were expected to continue throughout the '80s.

Conversely, survival of the '70s and progress during the last four years did not necessarily signal relief for two-year schools. One of the unexpected changes has been with the enrollment population. Recently, two-year colleges have been faced with possible enrollment declines for the next several years. Although previous statistical reports had projected escalated enrollments at two-year institutions, current reports have expressed some doubts and concerns. The fall enrollment in 1984 showed that two-year schools were faced with their largest enrollment decline in 20 years (Meyer, Chronicle, 1984). The shadowy doubts about future increases are beginning to reflect even at two-year schools who once maintained enrollment stability.

Moreover, as the need for quality, as well quantity, becomes a primary concern for both two- and four-year institutions, institutional policies are being addressed and modified. For example, currently, open-door admission policies are still being examined and questioned. The urgent need to promote excellence in education has become profound. Consequently, college admission standards have been raised at most four-year institutions. This institutional change has stirred up controversy about whether or not

two-year colleges should be exempted from this national educational effort.

Some opponents of open-door admissions contend that two-year institutions are too accessible for students. They want to shut the doors and raise admission standards for all postsecondary schools (Hook, 1983). Purportedly, the open doors in the '70s largely contributed to the academic disaster in the '80s. As a result, this position has caused rising social pressure to force community colleges to close their doors to unprepared students (McCabe, 1981; Watkins, 1982). Vaughan (1984) also contends that community colleges with open access are being dishonest to students, because he argues that students are not being given educational opportunities when they are academically unprepared for the programs. However, Biemiller's (1983) perspective is that some admission directors view this reform as limited access for needy students who want to pursue higher education.

Initially, high school graduates who were inadequately prepared for four-year college-level work were attracted to two-year schools. These two-year schools were willing to adequately prepare and accommodate them. They were postsecondary institutions that afforded slower achievers who had chronic academic deficiencies with successful opportunities to learn. Parenthetically, these institutions taught vocational skills that were needed for the job market.

As many postsecondary institutions continue to examine their admission policies, two-year schools will also find the need to reform. Increased standards at four-year schools may help redefine some of the original purposes of two-year schoools. Increased standards could return legitimacy to both two-and three-year technical and business training schools. However, the task will not be easy, because there are persistent questions and concerns regarding the schools. The future directions that two-year institutions

take will greatly depend on why they exist and for whom they exist.

Over ten years ago, Corcoran (1973) observed that a middle-class student population was the sole beneficiaries of community colleges, not disadvantaged students. Similar observations have been made in recent years. Community colleges have tended to attract a white, middle-class population. Robert G. Templin, Jr., Dean of Instruction at Piedmont Virginia Community College, contends that middle-class students who were once classified as traditional four-year college students are now attending community colleges (In Watkins, Chronicle, 1984).

It is projected that community colleges will continue to reflect a white, middle-class student population as the doors that were widely open to poor, disadvantaged, and minority-group students begin to close. Is this to say that new middle-class population trends will alter the original educational goals of two-year colleges? Will this new trend prevent more disadvantaged and minority students who are less prepared academically from having access to two-year schools?

II. PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study was to assess the current status of the student body at a two-year institution in light of the above assertions that students in these institutions are beginning to reflect the white, middle-class stereotype.

The following issues were addressed in the study:

1. What are the salient personal characteristics of the students (race, age, marital stutus, etc.)?
2. Are there statistical significant differences with students' socieoconomic status (SES)?

3. In effect, can the majority of the students attending the college be described as middle-class whites?

III. METHODOLOGY

During the Summer Quarter, 1984, a sample of 56 students were randomly selected from a population of 310 students attending a small, private urban two-year college. The majority of the students at the college were white (76%) and female (60%). As a result, most of the sample consisted of white (61%) female (86%) students. All the students in the sample were classified as full-time beginning and continuing students who had met previous test admission standards. In addition, the Stanford Achievement Test scores of the sample group revealed an average grade level of 11.0. A large percentage of the sample was between the ages of 17 and 25 (68%). Seventy-seven percent of the sample graduated from high school with a diploma, and 23 percent obtained a G.E.D.. The average scholastic high school grade for the group was 2.85.

A closed questionnaire was used to collect data from the subjects. The survey form consisted of twenty-four questions with a limited number of alternative responses. Most of the item questions included an "other" category. Item questions provided personal information about the subjects, as well as eductional and economical levels of families. Chi-square measurements were utilized to analyze the data to answer the questions in the study. The level of significance was set at .05.

IV. DATA RESULTS

Of the sample participating in the study, 59 percent of the group was single with at least one dependent child. Household heads, as well

as household members varied. Twenty-seven percent of the respondents were household heads; whereas, father heads accounted for 23 percent; mother heads accounted for 18 percent, and spouses as heads accounted for 14 percent. Eighteen percent of the sample failed to respond.

In analyzing the data, comparative findings were found between the sample of white black, and other minority students. Family socioeconomical levels (SES) did not differ statistically significantly between the two groups. (See Table I.) The majority (48%) of the parents from both groups had a high school education, while 29% had some college or were college graduates; 23 percent completed elementary/junior high, X^2 (2) = 1.73, $p > .30$. Families incomes were relatively low between both groups of students; however, more incomes ($10,000-15,000/over) were reported for white families than for minorities, but no significant difference, X^2 (3) = 4.70, $p > .10$. When respondents were asked about their personal socioeconomical status, personal incomes did not differ significantly, X^2 (2) = .23, $p > .80$. (See Table II.) Most of the sample (66%) reported an income under $5,000. Comparatively, more minority respondents (76%) were unemployed, while only 24 percent of the whites were unemployed. These unemployment findings resulted in significant differences between the two groups, X^2 (1) = 20.47, $p < .001$. Of the 84 percent of the whites who were employed, the primary job sources were school and self.

As Table III presents, most of the sample received some type of financial assistance for their education: Pell Grant (37%), Loan (33%), Work Study (19%). Only 11 percent of the sample had aid from parents or other sources. No significant difference was found between students, X^2 (3) = 5.01, $p > .10$. In fact, if most of the sample did not have financial aid, it would be extremely

TABLE I

Descriptive Data of Parents' Level of Education and Family Incomes of Ethnic Groups

	White Parents		Minority Parents	
Level of Education	N	%	N	%
Elementary/Jr. High	7	53.8	6	46.2
High School	20	74.1	7	25.9
Some College	6	60.0	4	40.0
College Graduate	4	66.7	2	33.3
Family Incomes				
Under $5,000	25	75.8	8	24.2
$5,000 - 10,000	8	72.7	3	27.3
$10,000 - 15,000/over	4	66.7	2	33.3

TABLE II

Ethnic Differences Between Employment and Economic Status of Students

Variables	Minority Students (N)	White Students (N)	Chi-Sq.	df	p
(Employment)					
Yes	6	31			
No	16	5	20.47	1	<.001*
(Job Source)					
Self	4	13			
School	5	14			
Other	3	4	.96	2	>.30
(Personal Income)					
Under $5,000	8	25			
5,000 - 10,000	3	8			
10,000 - 15,000	2	4	.23	2	>.80

*p is less than level of significance set at .05.

TABLE III

Ethnic Comparisons of Financial Sources for Education

	White Students		Minority Students		Chi-Sq.	df	p
Source With Financial Aid	N	%	N	%			
Pell Grant	7	50.0	17	50.0			
Student Loan	19	63.3	11	30.7			
Work-Study	13	76.5	4	23.5			
Parents/Other	8	80.0	2	20.0	5.01	3	>.10
Source Without Financial Aid							
Work	33	66.0	17	34.0			
Parents	2	33.3	4	66.7			
Sister/Brother/Other	4	50.0	4	50.0	3.42	3	>.30

difficult for them to stay in school (73%). Both groups were comparatively the same, $X^2(1) = 1.01$, $p > .30$. Yet, the subjects said they would be willing to work to attain their educational goals (78%). Only 13 percent said they could receive some assistance from a sister, brother, or others, and 9 percent could rely on parental assistance, $X^2(3) = 3.42$, $p > .30$.

An unexpected finding in the study revealed that self-motivation was a primary factor with the students' selection to obtain an education from a two-year college (40%). The white students (81%) tended to reflect this high percentage; whereas, the black students were influenced by friends (65%) rather than themselves (19%). Other influential factors in college selection were spouse (11%), parents (22%), and others (6%). This finding was statistically significant, $X^2(4) = 15.15$, $p < .05$.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The data findings provided answers to questions addressed in the study. The study was primarily concerned with salient personal characteristics of the students enrolled at a two-year college. Literature findings have reported a new student population (middle-class whites) trend at these institutions. The findings from this investigated study only concluded that the majority of the students as the college were white, female students. As a group, the students would not be considered middle-class because the incomes and education levels were low. However, the data results suggest that the students are working-class students who have decided to pursue an education. The results further suggest that the college's placement office should seek to assist minorities with employment-seeking skills. Financial and job sources tended to be fewer for minorities. Overall, most of the findings from the study did not differ significantly between white and minority students. In summary,

the two-year college apparently has not limited the access to needy students who want to pursue postsecondary education. This study does not affirm recent findings; yet, it enhances the need for two-year colleges to maintain their original purposes and goals as community colleges for training skills needed for the job market.

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